DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 370 749 RC 019 649

AUTHOR Nachtigal, Paul M.
TITLE Political Trends Affecting Nonmetropolitan America.
PUB DATE 8 Feb 94
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Rural Education Symposium during the Annual Conference of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 7, 1994).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Information Analyses (070) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Futures (of Society); Governance; Participative Decision Making; Policy Formation; *Politics; *Public Policy; *Role of Education; *Rural Areas; Rural Urban Differences
IDENTIFIERS Political History; *Sense of Place

ABSTRACT

There are two stories about political trends affecting nonmetropolitan America. The old story, which is the story of declining rural population and declining rural influence on public policy formation, has its roots in early deliberations about governance in this country. Jefferson's republicanism focused on direct citizen involvement in decision making, with an implicit belief that people could rise above their own interests to pursue a common good. The federalists feared the instability of republican governments and concentrated on institutionalizing politics as the business of balancing interests, with the Constitution as a framework protecting the working of a "commercially competitive civil society." Eventually, the federalist view prevailed, setting the stage for the battles of rural versus urban interests that continue today. Under the current rules of the game, where numbers equate with power and power equates with privilege, rural people can only become more and more disadvantaged. A different world view is now emerging and may be found in the writings of Daniel Kemmis, David Orr, Wendell Berry, and others. Society is simultaneously bumping up against the limits of deteriorating communities and the limits of what the natural environment can sustain. In the new story, the ground rules of politics shift from those of a "commercially competitive civil society" to those based on "ecological sustainability." This shift must begin by redefining the arena of our lives to be the regional ecosystem, and by refocusing public problem solving as the "politics of place." Education, which has been shaped by federalism as surely as has the political system that it serves, must also be "re-formed," and must include experiences that foster a sense of place. Contains 6 references. (SV)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Paul M. Nachtigal
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED 370 749

February 8, 1994

AERA Rural Education SIG
New Orleans, LA
April 7, 1994

Symposium
Implications of Recent Changes in Nonmetropolitan America

Political Trends Affecting Nonmetropolitan America

Paul M. Nachtigal, Director
Rural Institute
Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory

There are two stories concerning political trends affecting nonmetropolitan America which I would like us to examine. There is the old story which has had a fairly straight forward, fairly predictable and for rural America a fairly discouraging story line. It is a story of declining rural population and with it declining influence in the creation of public policy. It is a story that has its roots in the very early deliberations of how this country would govern itself. It is a story of differing philosophical beliefs about how individuals live together. It is ultimately a story of rural interests vs. urban interests. And, because of the way the rules of the game have been established, the interests that get served are those of the political victors.

The latter part of the paper begins a discussion of a very early draft of a new story. This alternative story will redefine the way we think about and practice political action and, in fact, will redefine the arena within which political action takes place. The new story will not be one of "rural vs. urban" but a story of "place". In many instances it will be a story of "rural AND urban". Because the story is just being written how the plot will unfold is still

RC019649

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

unclear. Those of us deeply interested in the future of rural America may well be participants in determining how the new story develops.

Before we begin an examination of the two stories, a word about politics. is in order. "Politics" as used in this paper is the process of making decisions for the public good. As we all know there are many different perspectives about how the "public good" gets defined. Within the tradition of partisan politics, the "process" takes on two important dimensions. First, is the dimension of who gets to say, i.e. who has the most votes or who can bring the most political pressure. The second dimension is what gets said or who benefits from the policy resulting from the political action. And, while the two dimensions tend to be related, i.e. those who can get the most votes tend to benefit, in the classic rural/urban debates this is not always the case. Just because the rural interests "win" does not necessarily mean that all those living in rural areas benefit. Certainly, the same could be said for urban interests.

The Old Story, Rural vs. Urban

Beliefs About How We Are To Be Governed-

The urban-rural rivalry, whether in Congress or in the legislative halls of the state house, is timeless. The first skirmish between rural and urban interests goes back at least as far as 1787 when Daniel Shays led an insurrection in western Massachusetts. This was a struggle between debtor farmers and city creditors. While Shays' Rebellion, as it is called in history books, was a fairly minor incident in the larger scheme of things, it had a major impact on how the political process was to work in this country. As such, it had a major influence on defining the rules of the game in which the "rural vs. urban" struggle would play

out over the next 200+ years. For it was this incident that helped shape the debate of the delegates to the Constitutional Convention.

> How should this struggle (Shay's Rebellion) and others like it be worked out? The question came down to whether democratic citizens should be expected to work out the solution to such struggles directly among themselves or whether it is possible to adopt a machinery of government which would pump out solutions without requiring such direct citizen engagement. Should the burden of solving public problems rest most directly on citizenship or on government? (Kemmis, 1990: 11)

Thomas Jefferson argued that the "republican tradition" rested squarely upon a face-to-face, hands-on approach to problem-solving. This tradition held an implicit belief that people could rise above their particular interest to pursue a common good. Republicanism was firmly rooted in the notion of civic virtue.

Madison, Hamilton and the Federalists argued the other side:

> ...fearful of the instability of republic governments, (they) explicitly urged abandoning the language of civic virtue. They concentrated instead upon creating mechanisms to keep tyranny at bay without requiring common goals or institutions of intense popular participation. These developments had a fateful impact on political life and political discourse in America. The Federalist constitution of 1787 and the language of political mechanics it advanced together institutionalized the notion that politics is a business of balancing interests... Where the civic republicans had emphasized conscious responsibility for the destiny of the political community, the Federalists emphasized the constitution as a framework which could protect the

working of *commercially competitive civil society* [emphasis added]. (Sullivan, 1982: 12)

While the views of the Federalists prevailed in the writing of the Constitution and related documents which provide the framework for the nation's government, Jefferson's hope of infusing "republican principles" in the country's political process remained. It lay in the agrarian nature of this new country. As long as the majority of the population were farmers, this civic virtue, this face-to-face, hands-on approach to problem solving, would be sustained. There were, in Jefferson's mind, no limits to the availability of land for additional farmers to inhabit. An agrarian society would serve as a gyroscope, keeping "civic virtue" at the core of American society.

To the Victors Belong the Spoils -

As the Nineteenth Century came to a close, the struggle for control of the political soul of the nation reached a critical turning point. The agrarian populist movement was at its height. It appeared that Jefferson's faith in an educated farm population would, indeed, triumph. Republican civic virtue would become the norm for political action. Ironically, just as the populist movement was on the verge of grasping national power, Frederick Jackson Turner, the noted American historian, declared the American frontier closed.

Comes the election of 1896. The agenda of the agrarian populist movement was carried by William Jennings Bryan who received the nomination of both the Democratic and Populist Parties. His opponent, William McKinley represented the voices of the Eastern urban industrialists. Backed by the monied interests of Madison Avenue and employing the emerging mass communication technology, the agrarian populists were defeated, never again

to be a real challenge to the political process as defined by a federalist form of government. The stage for the "old story" was now set, the conventions established by the Federalist notion of a "commercially competitive civic society" were in place. And while the philosophical battle of how American politics would be conducted was decided, the battle of "rural vs urban" interests had just begun. These battles continue today and range from the access and control of Western water to who gets the largest slice of funds for the support of public education.

(I am deeply indebted to Daniel Kemmis and his book **Community and the Politics of Place** for the above civics lesson. I have drawn heavily from this book, particularly the early chapters, in writing this section. While some of the words, e.g. Shays' Rebellion, Populist Party, Federalist form of government, were still familiar from formal courses in American government in my younger days, it has taken 30+ years of experience and writers such as Kemmis to achieve an understanding of the consequences of these early events. My thanks to him.)

The Old Story Unfolds -

Even though the agrarian forces lost the battle of how the political process would be conducted rural interest fared quite well during the early years of the country's history. America was, after all, very much a rural country. Up until 1918, rural America was home to one-half of all residents. Sixty years later, only one-fourth of the population was rural. Today, only 15 states have 50% or more of their population residing in non-metropolitan areas. Further eroding rural dominance was the Supreme Court's one-person, one-vote decision. A combination of these two events have been reflected in the reapportionment of

representation of legislative membership at both the state and federal level, placing the control of these governmental bodies more and more in control of urban and suburban interests.

Population shifts and the one-person, one-vote decision represent only one dimension of the political trends that have affected the well-being of nonmetropolitan residents. Other factors diminishing the rural voice in the political arena include

o the makeup and tactics of voter activists. Single issue coalitions such as the elderly, or gender, cut across geographic lines, dividing constituencies and resulting in less political influence.

o the traditional perspective that agricultural policy equates with rural policy. This was certainly closer to being true in years past, however today, farming employs fewer that 1 in 10 rural residents. Today, agriculture policy is much more likely to benefit corporate farming operations which are closer philosophically to the views of McKinley's Madison Avenue supporters than to the agrarian beliefs of the supporters of Bryan.

o the reluctance of rural people to organize into coalitions which speak with a common voice and which can play by the rules of a federalist form of government. Rural people tend to be "rugged individualists", much more comfortable dealing with problems face-to-face in a one-on-one basis.

o the lack of a clearly articulated, comprehensive vision of what rural policy would look like. How one creates such a vision while at the same time honoring the diversity which characterizes rural America has yet to be addressed.

o the fact that rural representatives are under-represented in powerful committee chairs which, because of their influence, can assure the passage or killing of legislation which would benefit rural America. (Jahr, 1988: 5)

It is difficult to see how this story can have a happy ending from the perspective of nonmetropolitan America. The current trends all suggest less and less influence in the "commercially competitive civil society" as envisioned by Madison and Hamilton. One could hope for beneficent, egalitarian politicians at the state and federal level that would see it as being in their best interests to assure a prosperous and viable rural sector. Experience would suggest that is unlikely, particularly in a time of budget deficits.

Dale Jahr, in his paper **The Rural Political Economy: Change and Challenge** after documenting the demise of rural political power, suggests that perhaps the only way rural interests will be protected in the future is to push for a "Rural Rights Act". As with the Civil Rights movement, it will be necessary to show that rural America is both "disadvantaged" and "discriminated" against. Certainly, the disadvantaged status of rural America is well documented. Data on personal income, poverty rates, unemployment and underemployment, incidence of sub-standard housing all show rural America being worse off than urban America. And, Jahr points out that there are examples of Federal discrimination. As an example, because of under-reporting of unemployment and the way the formula was designed for the Job Training Partnership Act of 1982, rural areas were denied over $100 million in funding from 1983 through 1985, according to a preliminary analysis by the General Accounting Office. (Jahr, 1988: 22-24)

So, is the ending of the old story a "rural rights act"? Are rural people sufficiently

endangered to become a "protected minority"? Certainly, if demographic trends continue the way they are projected, the "rural vs. urban" battle becomes more and more of a one-sided affair. Rural people will become more and more dis-empowered. Urban interests will be well in control. Will the largess of urban policy makers take good care of rural interests? Given the nature of human nature, not likely. Would a rural rights act take care of rural interests? Perhaps we need to ask those who are still seeking their civil rights. It may be time for a new story.

Interlude

The rural/urban battles have been just one of the scenarios resulting from the Madison, Hamilton forces prevailing in those early debates. Another scenario which has impacted both urban and rural has been the centralization of power, economically and politically. Centralization of decision making, consolidation of organizational structures has been the center piece of a "commercially competitive civil society." Centralization which first took place at the national level, has now gone global. By the year two thousand, according to our national educational goals, we must be first in the world in math and science in order to be competitive in the global society.

A less esoteric example of this commercially competitive centralization which impacts us all has been the displacement of agrarian farmers with corporate agriculture. In spite of the evidence which concludes that medium sized farmers, those selling around $133,000 in crops annually, employing one or two people and using up-to-date equipment provide peak efficiency in food production, corporate farms continue to take over the nation's

food production. Just coincidentally, these largest farms reap tremendous profits because of federal policy - from tax laws to subsidy programs - which favor these largest operations over the midsize and small producers. Just four firms account for 86% of the breakfast cereals sold in America; four companies sell 62% of the broiler chickens; three giants sell almost three-quarters of the nations beef, and the same three - IBP, ConAgra and Cargill - also control between 30 and 40% of the nations hog market. Cargill the largest of the agri-businesses employs 42,000 people in 46 countries with an annual sales volume ($32.3 billion) equal to the combined gross national products of Chile and Ecuador. (Davidson, 1990: 162-164)

This picture is a far cry from Jefferson's society of educated agrarian farmers, pursuing their lives in a society which creates its rules by face-to-face, hands-on problem solving. And lest we forget, this phenomena is not limited to food production. GTE, one of the nation's larger telecommunications companies, announced January 13, 1994, that it would lay off 17,000 employees "to improve customer service." (Rocky Mountain News, Jan. 14, 94) The general populace of the country, and certainly individuals in local communities, had little, if anything, to say about this decisions, or for that matter, any of the decisions made by the giant food processors. Distant decision makers, in their unceasing search for efficiency and effectiveness, make their choices for the good of the corporation. We have lost control of who produces our food, the quality of what we eat, and to a large extent how we live our lives. If this is the consequence of a political system based on "commercially competitive civil society", then to borrow a phrase from Wendell Berry, "What are people for?"

The New Story, The Politics of Place

Keeping citizens apart has become the first maxim of modern politics. - Jean Jacques Rousseau

We confront daily the extent to which citizens have been kept apart from each other. In fact, we are not only apart from each other but rapidly becoming alienated one from another. Gang violence, drug abuse, growing demand for more and more prisons, and, closer to home for most of us, the mean spirited ideological battles that are becoming ever more frequent around school reform. What is the role of education in society? How should our children be educated? With the isolation of citizens, the disintegration of community, arriving at consensus around these very fundamental questions is increasingly difficult, if not impossible. Society has lost its center. It is each one for himself, we have lost any sense of the common good. And, just as we are bumping up against the limits of deteriorating communities, we are also bumping up against the limits of what the natural environment can sustain. The basic ground rules must be shifted from those based on that of a "commercially competitive civil society" to those base on "ecological sustainability". If the political trend line which has brought us to this place is to change, it is time to abandon at least some portions of the political course set by Madison and Hamilton and adopt at least some of Jefferson's vision of what it could have been and perhaps in some measure might still become.

Ecosystem Level Societies -

David Orr in his book **Ecological Literacy: Education and the Transition to a Postmodern World** advocates replacing our industrial, competitive society with one grounded in and in harmony with the ecology. He makes a persuasive argument for moving beyond "technological sustainability", e.g. solving the problems which we have caused in our environment with another technical solution, to "ecological sustainability", e.g. living in such a way that the problems do not arise. (Orr, 1992: 23-40) To move in this direction will mean reexamining and changing "the way we live our lives", socially and economically; and "how we do politics", how we go about collective problem solving. So, how might we begin? Orr, Kemmis, Wilkinson, along with others, advocating an alternative world view to our ever escalating industrial global competition suggest that a place to begin is to redefine operationally the arena within which we live our lives. They propose the notion of "bioregionalism" or creating ecosystem-level societies. Some of the defining features of bioregionalism include :

- o Defining political social systems which are in harmony with the ecosystem, e.g. areas defined by mountain ranges, or water sheds. Organizing around natural features provides fundamental reasons for finding "common ground" around such issues as air quality, water usage, land development, etc.
- o The re-inhabitation of those areas in ways that are sustainable, e.g. "Doing things right means living as though your grandchildren would also be alive, in this land, carrying on the work we're doing right now, with deepening delight." (Kemmis, 1990: 80)

o The reinvention of politics at the ecosystem level requires clarity about what should be done locally and what can only be done at higher levels. Effective controls on carbon emissions, for example, can only be accomplished at an international level. Energy conservation, the means of reducing energy use and thereby the release of CO2 is best done by individuals, institutions and individual communities. (Orr 1992: 72-73)

o The reinvention of politics at the ecosystem level will require a substantial disengagement from the global economy and the passivity and dependence it fosters. Practically, this means stopping some things, such as subsidies for agribusiness and preferred tax treatment for large corporate enterprises, utilities, and land speculators. On the other side, it means rebuilding the local communities, small towns, and neighborhoods that have suffered from decades of neglect. (Orr p. 72-73)

Conducting public affairs in bioregions, at the ecosystem level, would involve those residing in urban areas **and** those residing in the surrounding rural areas, acting together to will a common world. Cities and rural areas, recognizing their interdependency, would have the capacity to define working economies. The health and viability of each would depend upon the health and viability of the other. Politics would move beyond rural **versus** urban to rural **and** urban. Conducting public affairs at the ecosystem level provides both the opportunity and the responsibility to practice republicanism in the Jeffersonian sense, to rediscover and make a reality of civic virtue.

A Matter of Place -

Kemmis talks about this refocusing of public problem solving as "the politics of place". Understanding the notion of "place" is critical to creating a new politics. Wallace Stegner, a regional writer of the West, through his elegant prose helps those of us living in the West to understand what it means to live in that place. Regional writers in the South, or the Midwest or the Northeast can do the same for those residing in those regions. Jefferson believed in the fundamental necessity of an educated electorate. If we are to experience even a partial realization of the Jeffersonian dream, education must include experiences which help us understand the place that we inhabit. It is important for four reasons.

- o First, it requires the combination of intellect with experience.
- o Second, the study of place is relevant to the problems of overspecialization, which has been called a terminal disease of contemporary civilization.
- o Third, it has significance in reeducating people in the art of living well where they are.
- o Finally, knowledge of place - where you are and where you come from - is intertwined with knowledge of who you are. (Orr, 1992: 125-131)

If we are to have a new story, if the trend lines are to change for not only rural Americans but urban Americans as well, education will also need to be re-formed. For its present state of operation has been as surely shaped by the Madisons and Hamiltons as the political system which it serves.

Is this new story just wishful thinking? Is it possible to change the political course of a ship-of-state that has been on that course for more than two centuries? There is growing evidence that indeed it may be possible. There is growing evidence that at least around some

issues people are wanting more say about their resolution. A case in point is the battle over future regulation of grazing on Bureau of Land Management (BLM) public lands.

Governor Roy Romer (Colorado) and Interior Secretary Bruce Babbit have conducted eight lengthy local meetings over the future regulation of cattle grazing on BLM lands. Key to the proposed reforms is the shift of grazing decisions from BLM land managers to local groups made-up of ranchers, environmentalists, miners, recreationists and other significant public land users. In announcing the preliminary results of these meetings Secretary Babbit said, "Perhaps we can resolve this century-old conflict by bringing management back to the state and local level...it will take us together on the landscape, here in the West to make it work."

The editorial in which this was reported "Westerners will have to live with both cows and condos", (Denver Post, Sunday, January 23, 1994) goes on to say-

> The traditional Western rancher or miner, threatened in various ways by previous Washington-based methods of public land regulation, would welcome stronger local control, but also would fear the arrival of such "dudes" as the environmentalists and recreationists at the policy table. But policy made by a consensus of **all** public-land users is slowly replacing the older domination of agriculture, mining, and water development interests.

Face-to-face, hands-on approach to problem solving, guided by the principle of "civic virtue", Jefferson would have been proud.

Summary

This paper was written in an attempt to address the political trends facing

nonmetropolitan America. I have focused on the only issue which in the long run really matters: the disempowerment of rural people. Within the current rules of the game, the rules of a "commercially competitive civil society" where numbers equate with power and power equates with privilege, rural people can only become more and more disadvantaged. Since ending on that note seemed too discouraging, I have tried to summarize a different world view that is emerging from writers and thinkers like Daniel Kemmis, David Orr, quoted heavily here, along with others such as Wendell Berry, Wallace Stegner, Charles Wilkinson, Osha Gray Davidson, Marty Strange, Wes Jackson and a host of others. America needs a different vision of how we go about identifying and securing "the public good". Stalemate, according to Kemmis, is the result of our current construct of political action. It is always possible to gain sufficient support to keep things from happening. It is increasingly difficult to gains sufficient support to move ahead. Changing these circumstances will require a different way of doing politics.

References

Davidson, O. (1990). **Broken heartland: the rise of America's rural ghetto.** New York, Anchor Books, Doubleday.

Jahr, D. (1988). **The rural political economy: change and challenge.** Report to the Republican Staff, Joint Economic Committee, United States Congress.

Kemmis, D. (1990). **Community and the politics of place.** Norman, University of Oklahoma Press.

Orr, D. (1992). **Ecological literacy: education and the transition to the postmodern world.** Albany, State University of New York Press.

Sullivan, W. (1982). **Reconstructing public philosophy.** Berkeley, University of California Press.

Wilkinson, C. (1992). **The eagle bird: mapping a new West.** New York, Pantheon Books